

## Stewardship Sermon

October 11, 2015

One way you can tell it is the traditional time for the stewardship campaign in churches is by the Gospel lessons the lectionary editors choose for us in October. This Sunday, the story of the rich man (or the rich young ruler according to other Gospel accounts) and his encounter with Jesus is one of the obvious choices to get us to think about money and faith and how we relate them to each other. The good news is that at the end of this sermon, I will not ask you to give away all your money.

This story is a very important one for us to read, pray about, and reflect on, regardless of the time of the year. I know it is one that has guided me in my faith journey over twenty-plus years. Similar versions of this story are found in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). With some interesting variations in details, they recount the same basic tale.

A rich man comes up to Jesus with a question. This happened fairly often with Jesus as a rabbi with a growing reputation for insight about life and faith. The rich man wants more—he wants to know what to do to gain eternal life. The rich man presents himself as someone who is faithful in keeping the Ten Commandments and he is pleased about that. But he seems to know there is still something missing. And Jesus gives him that key—giving up everything he owns and following Jesus.

Now if this was the “altar call” invitation used by Billy Graham, I doubt if many folks would have come forward at his crusades. But the good news for us is this has never been taught by the church as the requirement to find eternal life. The church has instead described it as a “counsel of perfection” to be followed by monks and missionaries and others called to a higher level of committed service.

But still, this passage is haunting. For me and perhaps for you, it echoes questions about life and its meaning that go deep. In our world today, instead of asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” we say things like “What is the meaning of life? Why do we exist? Why is there suffering and uncertainty and so many things that we do not understand?” And Jesus’ answer to the rich man helps us to consider those types of questions in a different way.

This rich man and the language he used in his question portrays a certain view of life. His emphasis was on him as an individual and what he could do with his personal actions in order to gain a benefit for him alone. Doesn’t his perspective ring true with how so many of us look at life? What can I do? What can I get? What’s in it for me? And we think like this even when we are looking at such transcendent issues as eternal life. Amazing—and misguided.

But we have good news in the midst of this man missing the deeper point about the meaning of life. It says “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...” This conscientious, competitive, and self-centered man was still a person that Jesus loved. Jesus saw the potential in this man’s heart to live differently and so Jesus presented him with a big challenge in the hope of inspiring him to do something that he might consider impossible—to stop thinking so much about himself.

This rich man thought of his life as a scorecard. He was faithful in keeping the Ten Commandments-- he had lived in a way to do no overt harm to others and in order to comply with his basic social obligation, honoring his parents. Check. And rather by his own efforts or inheritance or both, he was wealthy. Check. But then Jesus challenged him to be more, to do more-- and this man walked away. So from the rich man’s score card point of view, at best he got an “incomplete.”

But this encounter was about more than a test that the rich man failed—that would be his way of looking at it. Instead it was Jesus inviting this man to live differently. To see that life is not about keeping score but rather about keeping relationships.

The point of the story is not about him failing a test that involved selling his possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor. Jesus’ emphasis was not on the sacrifice of his goods, but rather on a change in his perspective so that he could think about others and participate in deeper relationships with people all around him who had nothing.

Let’s use our sacred imagination about how this could have taken place:

- Instead of an overwhelming religious effort that involved great sacrifice, what if the rich man was able to sell his things with great joy?
- What if he could have sold them without dickering too much about price—perhaps even given some of his possessions away?
- And what if in giving the money to the poor, it was not just a grim charity. Instead, what if he gave money away based on relationships he developed over time. Or even if he gave money to meet needs he knew about already but had ignored in the past?

For a literary example, think of the conversion of Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. After the visit of the three spirits on Christmas Eve, Scrooge finally “got it” so that he thought differently about his money. Scrooge finally did the right thing for others-- he paid Bob Cratchit a living wage; and over and above that, he gave generously to help care for Tiny Tim and others in need.

I believe that is what Jesus’ invitation to the rich man was about. As someone told me recently, Jesus’ invitation to sell our possessions and give away the money to the poor sounds scary, even terrifying. Bu it is also potentially liberating.

Jesus’ invitation is to live differently, to see wealth as a means to an end, the end being living in a community of faith that understands all that we have comes from God. If we get that

fundamental truth, then our stewardship is simply our response to do what is needed with that part of God's abundance currently in our possession.

That is what Jesus' words mean at the end of this Gospel. If we give up what we have, we get a hundredfold more in this life—more family, more relationships, more responsibility, more love, and even more suffering and persecution. We receive more life.

That gift comes from a change in how we live our lives—not as success oriented individuals basing our lives on a scorecard; but rather as people in relationship with others who seek to help others flourish.

That change in how we live causes us to protect and provide for a wider circle than just our individual selves and our immediate family. That is really what Jesus' answer is about for that rich man—and for us today.

That is how this dramatic and demanding story ties back to our stewardship message. Neither Tom McDonnell nor I nor anyone else helping with the stewardship campaign will be as bold as Jesus was in his response to this rich man. But the underlying message and spirit are the same.

For each of us in this community of faith, our call is to have an attitude in which we offer God everything we have and live a different quality of life. Tear up the scorecard that compares us with others and justifies all that we have and why we keep it. Then let us look at the world around us and see people differently. Let us listen for God's Spirit and see what we are called to be and to do as a community of faith.

For when you give a financial pledge and invest your time and talents here, you will find a community of people seeking to follow Jesus and learn and practice what he commands. Some of what we give will be used for practical things like maintaining the building and paying salaries. But even those practical things—this place and our people—are dedicated to caring for the world around us.

In the weeks and months ahead, we will be discerning how to broaden how we do that as a community that builds relationships with all sorts of people—our nearby neighbors and those far away; people in prison and others who have gotten off the right path; and those seeking to return. Participating in those types of relationships is what really matters in life. As our Lord said, that way of living in this life is the key to eternal life in the age to come. Amen.